

UNITED STATES  
**HOLOCAUST**  
MEMORIAL  
**MUSEUM**

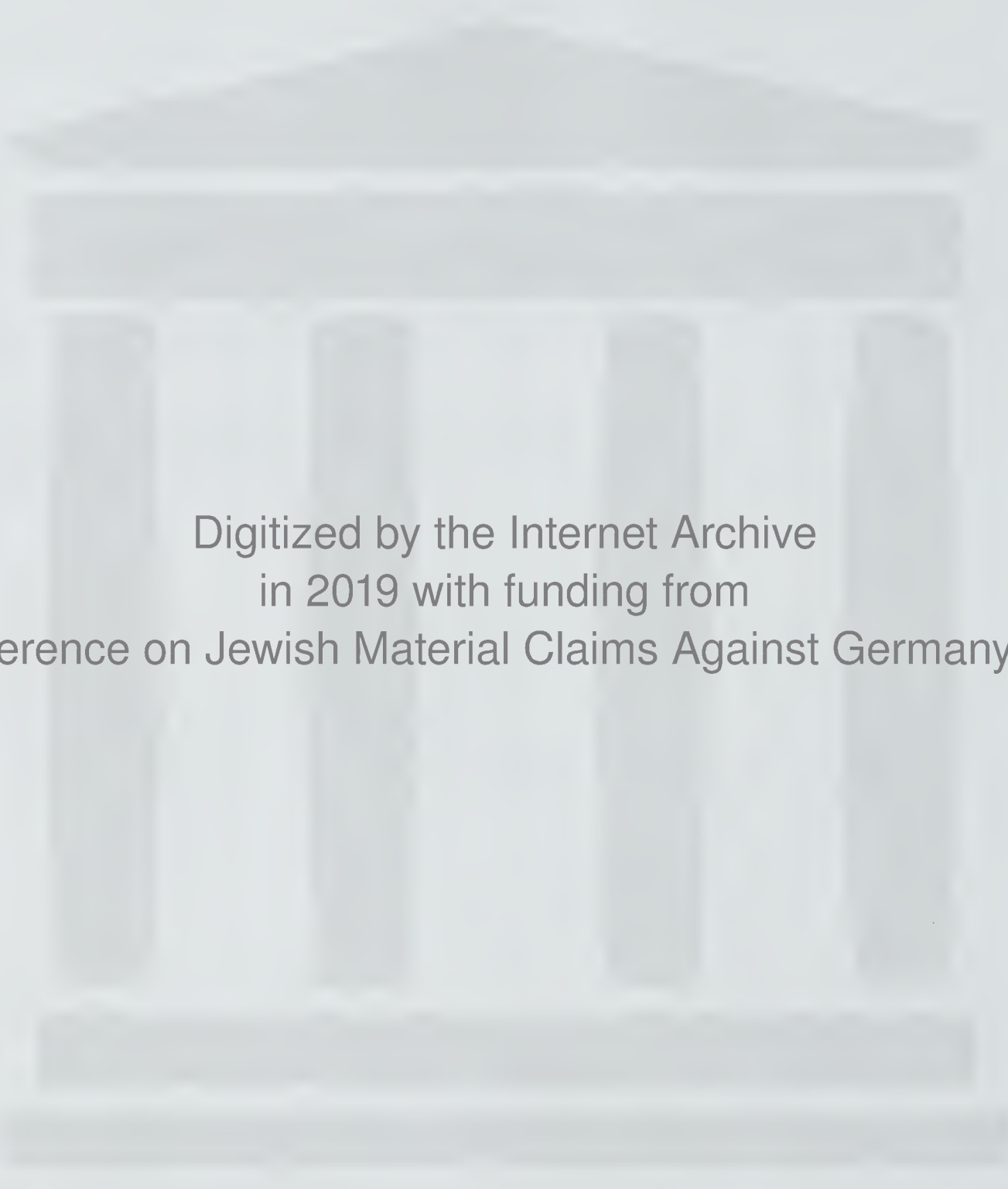


ועידת התביעות  
**Claims Conference**  
Conference on Jewish Material Claims  
Against Germany

## **Claims Conference Holocaust Survivor Memoir Collection**

Access to the print and/or digital copies of memoirs in this collection is made possible by USHMM on behalf of, and with the support of, the Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany.

The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Library respects the copyright and intellectual property rights associated with the materials in its collection. The Library holds the rights and permissions to put this material online. If you hold an active copyright to this work and would like to have your materials removed from the web please contact the USHMM Library by phone at 202-479-9717, or by email at [digital\\_library@ushmm.org](mailto:digital_library@ushmm.org).



Digitized by the Internet Archive  
in 2019 with funding from  
Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany, Inc.

<https://archive.org/details/wartimeodysseyme02brai>

# A WARTIME ODYSSEY

A MEMOIR

by

Gregor Chaim Braitberg  
St. Louis, Missouri  
2000

## Acknowledgments:

I wish to thank my wife Szyfra Braitberg for patiently reading my manuscript many times and for her valuable suggestions.

My thanks to Saramena Berman and Pamela Schultz for helping me with the editing of my memoirs.

If my children and grandchildren will desire to learn about the roots and background of their father and grandfather they will find my memoirs a valuable source.

© Gregor Chaim Braitberg

# A WARTIME ODYSSEY

A MEMOIR

by

Gregor Chaim Braitberg  
St. Louis, Missouri  
2000

0\$

134.72

B7243

A3

2000

c. 2



A WARTIME ODYSSEY  
A MEMOIR  
By GREGOR CHAIM BRAITBERG

The year was 1915; World War I was in full swing. The Germans had started a blockade of Great Britian. Poland was occupied by the Russians, who didn't care about the welfare of the Polish people. The city of Piortkov, where I was born, was half-destroyed. Hospitals, schools, and most public institutions were burned down. There was no food, no medicine, not any of the essentials for living to be found. This was the time when Nacha Braitberg, my mother, gave birth to twin sons.

It was an unfortunate time to be born. The world was full of hunger, starvation, cold, and misery.

In 1914, my father, Moishe, was drafted into the Russian Army to fight against the Germans. My mother was expecting a child - her seventh. My parents already had six children under the age of ten. My mother came from a family of landowners. She had a good childhood working in the fields, taking care of the cattle and horses, and enjoying all the pleasures of country living. My parents loved children, animals, and nature.

My mother, who was thirty, wasn't very happy when she realized she was expecting a seventh child, especially when her

husband wasn't there to help her. She tried to abort the pregnancy with whatever means she knew, as this was a time before there were medical facilities for having an abortion. She was not successful.

February 18, 1915, was a very cold, stormy day, our two-room apartment on the second floor did not heat up for quite a while, and it was bitter cold. There was no firewood or coal with which to make a fire. Neither was there warm water, or food. Such were the conditions when the midwife announced the good news to my mother: "Mazel tov, Nachale, you have twins - two boys!" "What did you say?" my mother cried out in horror, "Twins?" "Yes, Nachale, two handsome boys."

"What have I done to deserve such punishment? And how will I feed eight mouths?"

"Nachale, don't worry. God gives children, God brings food to them."

My mother's despair didn't last long; she couldn't afford such a luxury.

When the twins were eight days old, it was time to give them names. This is in accordance with Jewish tradition. My



mother gathered the whole family together, including Moise Laib and his wife, Sarah (our neighbors and good friends), and everybody proposed names for the babies.

Finally the decision was made: the first-born would be named Yaakov Aron, and the second-born would be named Chaim. When we were growing up, I always considered Yaakov my older brother, treating him with respect; he was, perhaps, a minute older than I.

As long as our mother breast-fed us, we managed okay, but after a year, my mother had to stop breast-feeding. We were eight children and she was the only one who could earn a living and supply the food. It was very difficult for her. She did what she could to keep us fed. My mother had to cook for us, wash the dishes, scrub the floors, do the laundry, keep us clean, and carry buckets of water up and down the stairs in order to do so. She liked to keep her children and her home clean.

My mother used to cook a big pot of soup made of potatoes, cabbage, and all other kinds of vegetables for us. When she put the pot of soup on the table, it took only a few minutes for the eight of us to finish this pot of delicious soup. We never had enough of it; we were always hungry. I never saw my poor mother eat. When she put the soup on the table, she always smiled,

watching her children gorge themselves with food. But she wouldn't eat. I couldn't understand how my mother could work so hard and never eat.

In our third year, Yaakov and I became sick. We couldn't even walk, we were so undernourished. My oldest brother, Leon, helped my mother a lot, since my father was still away in the army.

The people in our neighborhood were very poor, but they had a lot of empathy and compassion for each other. "Our neighbors will not go hungry," the redheaded Moishe Laib used to say. He himself eeked out a meager living by walking to neighboring villages and trading pins and children's toys for bottles and rags, which he later sold in the city for a meager profit. Then he would buy potatoes, a loaf of bread, a herring, and - sometimes - a lemon. While his wife, Sarah, was cooking the potatoes and preparing supper, Moishe Laib was going from house to house, inviting the neighbors to his home for a party. Moishe Laib and Sarah were great human beings. If they had something to eat, they had to share it with their hungry neighbors.

Moishe Laib had a lot of problems of his own. He was born to Jewish parents, but when he was a year old, he lost his parents, Polish neighbors adopted the little boy and raised him as a Christian.

When Moishe Laib grew up, he wanted to become a Jew again, but this wasn't easy. According to the Jewish law (Halacha), he was a "goy", not a Jew anymore, and according to the Orthodox rabbis, he was supposed to go through a complicated procedure to once more become a Jew. This had been difficult for him. I never did find out if he "became" a Jew again.

Moishe Laib's wife, Sarah, was our mother's midwife. Whenever she came to us, she sang a song which went like this:

Daddy is away and mommy toils all day.  
It's cold in the house, and no food,  
even for a mouse,  
But eat will the twins, what the good  
Lord brings!

Sarah behaved as though we twins belonged to her. She would come to us every morning and bring food for our family. The day before, she would go out to neighbors, and everybody would pitch in a few potatoes, some bread, an onion, a carrot, and even some firewood.

Our neighbors were all good human beings, righteous people. They believed that if their neighbor is hungry, it is for them to help. There were no professionals in our neighborhood, only hard-working poor people who eeked out meager livings which they shared with their hungry neighbors.



We had two well-to-do uncles. One was Moishe the baker, who owned a house and a piece of land. He baked and sold bread. Uncle Moishe was a good man. He offered to adopt the twins from my mother. "Nachale, give me the twins, I will make menchen (decent people) out of them. I'll send them to yesiva, and they will become rabbis." But my mother wouldn't give us away.

While Moishe the baker was a good man, his wife, Alta, was a heartless woman. Moishe offered to give us two loaves of bread every week. My brother, Josele, used to go to the bakery to pick up the bread. Josele would grab the bread and run, because if Alta caught him, she would take away the bread.

The other rich uncle was Josel the vinegar maker. He owned a vinegar factory. From time to time he used to give us a bottle of vinegar. From this, mother used to make all kinds of delicessen. This really helped us. But my mother didn't want to depend upon these donations.

So my mother organized her own business. Each day she would walk to the neighboring village to buy fruits and vegetables, carry this back to the city corner in the rich neighborhood, and try to sell it, in order to make the few groschen (pennies) she

needed to buy bread and potatoes to feed us. If the weather was bad, and it was impossible for her to walk to the country, there was still all the work to catch up with around the house. This is how we grew up until our father came back from the army.

There were Jewish organizations in our town which tried to help the poor. At any time, no matter what the situation, there were always some people who managed to make a good living. In the Jewish community, these people tried to help those, like my mother, with eight children to raise. Two of my sisters and two of my brothers were taken to an orphanage where they were given room and board and an education. They could still come home to help my mother, so this made it a little easier for her: instead of eight, she had only four to feed.

In 1918, World War I ended and my father returned home. After four years of living in the wet, cold, musty trenches with his rifle at his side, ready to kill or be killed, it was difficult for him to adjust to the civilian environment at home. He couldn't sit at the table and eat with his family, so he ate outside, even in the rain and snow. "I like to have my meal in the fresh air," he used to say: His health was not too good; he was constantly coughing and in pain. He had terrible nightmares. In his dreams, my father used to scream out in German or Russian,

wake up and grab for his rifle, ready to fight. Then he would realize where he was, sit down, and smoke one cigarette after another. "Smoking makes me feel good," he used to say. This behavior continued for many years.

My father was an excellent tailor. He set up a tailor shop in our house, and employed four people; two, my older sisters, and two, outsiders. Our standard of living improved considerably, as Poland's post-war economy improved. The services of a master tailor like my father were very much in demand. The tailor shop worked twenty-four hours a day.

My father's life dream was to own a house "so my family will have a roof over their heads" were his words. After a few years of hard work, he had saved enough money to buy a beautiful 16-room house on our street. But, alas, he never fulfilled his dream: everytime he was ready to settle the deal, something unexpected came up and the purchase was postponed. In September 1939, the Nazis marched into Poland; World War II had begun. In 1944, the Nazis arrested my father in a round up of prominent men in our town. The group was sent to a concentration camp from which my father never returned. Alas, my poor father never lived to see his four sons living in beautiful houses of their own in the United States. But, I get ahead of my story.....



We twins were four years old when the war ended and our father came home. Yaakov and I still couldn't walk, but slowly, slowly, we got up on our feet. My father was an Orthodox Jew, and he tried to give us a Jewish education. When Yaakov and I were five years old, we attended a Talmud Torah school where we were taught Jewish religion, Torah, Chumash, and so on. We attended that Talmud Torah until we were ten years old.

My older sister, Fe<sup>l</sup>ga, taught us to write, and by the time we were five years old she had arranged for us to also attend a Yiddish school organized by a Jewish political party called The Bund. We went to this school in the morning, and to the Talmud Torah in the afternoon. At the Bund school everything was taught in Yiddish; Polish was taught as a foreign language. So we learned to read and write in Yiddish and studied all the secular subjects: reading, writing, and arithmetic.

Our schools were good schools, and I remember that my twin brother and I were the best students. The teachers always told us so. We also studied science, language, Jewish literature, and Hebrew. I knew the works of Shalom Aleichem, Peretz, and all the other Jewish writers. Even today, my favorite language in which to read is Yiddish. It is a rich, beautiful language.

When my father came home from the war, he took the older children home from the orphanage. As I said, my father's tailor shop was prospering. My older brother, Leon, went to a trade school, and then on to a higher education, studying Latin and other languages, math, and science. After Leon graduated, he was able to find a good job.

When the war ended in 1918 Poland once more became an independent country. German and Russian occupations had plundered her; natural resources were exhausted. It was a very difficult time. People were hungry and it was hard to make a living. When Poland again became independent, anti-Semitism flared up. There were economic boycotts; Jews couldn't get a job in a factory. If Jews tried to open a store, Poles refused to buy from them. Somehow, the only Jew in our town to get a job in an office was my brother, Leon, who was very resourceful. He became what today would be called a bookkeeper. As a bookkeeper, Leon made good money. He was also a very devoted son, and helped out the whole family. Since my father was also working, things began to get better.

Poland had rules that all children had to finish seven years of an elementary school education. This was a must for everybody. My brother Leon wanted us to get a good education so that we

could be professionals. We attended, then, a Gymnasium, which meant a rigid, difficult curriculum and a strict code of behavior. The Gymnasium was co-educational; it was not free. Leon paid a certain amount, regularly, for our education. Yaakov and I were together all the time during these years at school. We had a good time. We were a team; we studied and worked together.

Another older brother, Joe, had an accident when he was a young boy. He was playing with friends and one of the boys hit him over the head with a baseball bat. Joe was unconscious for a whole week. To get a doctor at that time was very difficult, so my mother went to a rabbi. The rabbi suggested to put ice on his head. After about six or seven days, Joe finally opened his eyes and said, "Oh, my head is so wet." My mother ran to the rabbi to tell him. The Rabbi assured my mother that Joe would be okay again. My brother lived 83 years, but he could not study and did not get much of an education. It was suggested that he learn a trade; he became a great shoemaker.

At the end of World War II, liberated from one of the several concentration camps in which he was imprisoned, Joe emigrated to the United States. He remained in the shoe business in St. Louis until his death.



My sister, Fela, is a wonderful woman. In 1939, during the Nazi occupation of Poland, Fela was taken to a concentration camp, Buchenwald, along with her husband, son, and daughter. She and her daughter managed to survive the camp, but her husband and son were killed. After the war, she moved to Paris, remarried, and became a seamstress. She has been blessed with a grandson and two great-grandchildren. After many years, Fela lost her second husband. She has written her memoir's in French. My sister and I still stay in touch. Of my remaining brothers and sisters, one died before World War II, two died in the camps.

As teenagers, Yaakov and I belonged to a Zionist organization, Ha'Shomer Ha'Tzair. This was an organization that focused on building a desire in young people to emigrate to Israel. We were very active in this group, and greatly enjoyed it. Most of our free time was spent with the group. We were preparing to go to Israel and build a country. Meanwhile I had many friends, both Poles and Jews. We loved to play chess. That is also when I learned to play the violin.

My brother, Leon, somehow got a violin and started taking lessons. At that time there were no scholarships to music schools. If one wanted to study the violin it was very costly. Leon was able to hire a teacher and pay for his lessons. Yaakov and I would watch Leon practice the violin, and we were very

jealous. We, too, wanted to learn and play, but Leon was already paying for our education, and so we didn't think we could ask for violin lessons as well.

But we wanted to play the violin very much, so we watched closely, and would secretly practice while Leon was not home. He had told us never to touch his violin because we might break a string or the violin itself, but we played anyway, whenever we could. This went on for about a year without our brother's knowledge. One day while I was playing, Leon came home unexpectedly and heard me. "Who is playing the violin so beautifully?" he asked. I answered that it was I. "Where did you learn to play?" he wondered. I told him the truth, even though I was afraid of his response. Leon decided to take us to his violin teacher, whose name was Frankel.

The Frankel family at that time were millionaires. They were Russian Jews who came to Poland to escape the Russian revolution. They brought a lot of money with them from Russia, and bought a big, beautiful house in the center of Piotrkov. At that time the people who lived in the center of town were rich, and the poor lived on the outskirts. Frankel was a great violinist, and had been a student of Awer, one of the greatest violin teachers in the world.

So Leon took us to Frankel to see what he had to say about our playing. Frankel did not teach just anyone. He did not make a living from teaching the violin. He taught only for pleasure, and only worked with the most talented students. We still had to pay him something. He told us that he used the money we paid him to buy cigars that he smoked during our lessons. The lesson cost about one zlotah, equivalent to one dollar, a lot of money then. It was worth it to have him teach us.

When Frankel heard us play I'll never forget his words he told our brother, "These young men are very talented." Frankel suggested that since Leon did not have enough money for all three of us, that Leon pay for our lessons instead of his own. That is what Leon did.

Frankel's methodology was to just tell us: Play in tune and play beautifully." He did not go into the details of how to hold the bow, or even the violin itself.

Yaakov and I became semi-professional violinists. Everyone loved it when we played. All of our friends envied us, and we became very popular. I remember teaching my friends to play the violin when I was still very young. When my brother and I would play, their parents would say, "Oh, teach my boy", and we would say "Pay us." In this way we helped the family. I also taught



guitar and mandolin. At the age of fifteen, I taught professional musicians who played throughout Poland, in movie theaters and for silent movies. Many years later, when I went back to Piotrikow to play for Frankel, I learned that the Germans had killed him.

There was a carnival in Poland that traditionally began in December in celebration of the New Year, and ran through February. I was hired to play there. I also played professionally in other public places, like restaurants. People sat and had a cup of coffee and listened to live music. At that time there was no television or radio, so everyone really enjoyed listening to music. People would sit for hours discussing their business and drinking a cup of coffee. This is where my brother and I came into contact with rich and powerful people. Soon we organized our own jazz orchestra. Our group included guitarists, flutists, an accordian player, a pianist, and two violinists.

When we twins finished the Gymnasium, anti-Semitism was so rampant that no Jew could get a job. Since there was no future for a Jewish youth in Poland, we tried to get to Israel (Palestine) France, or another country where we might have better opportunities. But getting to another country required more money than we possessed. Somehow, the family managed to send Yaakov, as the

older twin son, to France, in 1937. In France, he changed his name to Jacques. Jacques lived in Paris, and studied at the Sorbonne until 1941. He spent the years of World War II all over France, as a Partisan fleeing from German and Vichy French authorities.

Meanwhile I was living in Poland with my parents, Leon, and my sister, Rashka; none of us children yet married. There was a saying in Russian: that you could "buy a cow for a penny, but where do you get the penny?" More or less, together, we managed to make a living, but I was always hungry. It seemed to me that the whole world was hungry. In fact, it seems to me today, that I was always hungry until I came to the United States, at the end of 1959.

Piotrokov was in central Poland, close to the German border. World War II began on September 1, 1939, and on September 5, the Germans occupied our town. The Germans came shooting, bombing, and killing. In that short time, our town was half-destroyed.

It was during this time that my mother died. When the Germans attacked Warsaw, much of the population of Poland began running towards our capitol, Warsaw, to defend it. Poland had a peace agreement with England and France and believed they would

come to our aide. But no one came. Not one country came to help us. Hitler said that by the time the French came to help, they would be able to light a pipe on the fires of Poland. My mother, father, Leon, and I joined the run to save Warsaw. By the time we got close to Warsaw, it was already occupied. We had with us my brother Joe's baby daughter, Sara, and as we were running and walking through the woods and meadows pushing and pulling the baby in the carriage, Nazi airplanes appeared in the sky and started shooting and dropping fire bombs, we ran to the nearest forest, leaving the baby in her carriage in the field. When I realized the baby was in mortal danger, I ran and brought the carriage with the little girl to safety. We had run for nearly 40 miles under the bombs and shooting. Once we saw that it was too late, we turned around. My mother, a heavy-set woman, by that time had damaged her gall bladder. A doctor diagnosed her illness as a cold. Two months later she became gravely ill. The surgeon at the hospital in Piotrkov told us that he could have saved her if he had examined her sooner. Now it was too late.

I loved my mother very dearly, and when she died, I knew I could not stay at home any longer. This was one of two reasons why I left Poland. The second reason was that by November, 1939, all males and females between the ages of ten and sixty had to register with the Nazis. Our whole lives had to be known to the



Germans. I figured as long as they didn't know who I was, where I lived, what I did, or anything else about me, it would still be possible to hide out and, maybe, stay alive.

Early in the war, people tried to escape to the Soviet Union, our closest neighbor. Many actually made it. Most of the older people didn't have the strength or the energy to escape, so they stayed in Poland and tried to survive. Many of us young people felt we needed to leave.

Almost everyone tried to dissuade me from leaving, especially Leon. Leon kept telling me that during the first World War, although the occupying army treated the population unfairly at first, eventually everything became orderly again. Still, I remained firm in my decision to leave Poland. My father, too, believed I had a better chance to stay alive in the Soviet Union. At the last moment, Leon decided to escape with me.

What did it mean to run away from Nazi-occupied Poland into the Soviet Union? We were by now confined to a ghetto; you could leave only at certain hours. A Jew caught in the wrong section of the city was shot. I made the decision that if I stayed in Poland, it would not be in a ghetto. If I were to die, it would be with a gun in my hand, shooting Germans. Some very good Polish

friends of mine, whom I trusted, urged me to join the partisans. These friends, non-Jews, were socialists and Communists. They treated me well, I do not believe they were anti-Semitic. It is probably true that every anti-Semite has a Jewish friend or two he likes and admires.

So I had two choices facing me: escape to the Soviet Union or join up with the partisans to fight the Germans. As I said, my decision was to leave. Years later, in 1959, when I eventually returned to Piotrkov from the Soviet Union, I found a monument dedicated to my Polish friends who died at the Germans' hands, fighting for Poland's freedom.

How do you get out of a country where you aren't wanted and yet you aren't permitted to leave? In order to get out of Poland, it was necessary to begin the odyssey in Warsaw. My plan was to get to Warsaw, then to go from Warsaw to a city called Szedlce, and from there across the Bug River to Brest-Litovsk in the Soviet Union. It was easy enough to make the decision to leave; it was something else to make the plan, and follow it through. My plan was complicated; a mission impossible.

Even if I made it through the streets to the railway station, and was lucky enough to secure a ticket, there was a worst case

scenario for Jews: the trains were full of Germans and Gestapo. If they recognized a Jew, they might easily throw him out from the moving train. There were many corpses lying along the railways. Even if the Germans didn't recognize a Jew outside of the ghetto, Polish collaborators knew exactly who was a Jew; the Nazi police were notified immediately.

And so, to make the three miles outside, from the ghetto to the railway station, was extremely dangerous. But, we made the dangerous trek to the station, bought tickets, and boarded the train for Warsaw. The train was packed with German soldiers. Sitting amongst them this way for two hours felt like being in the mouth of a tiger. There is such a thing called luck; so far we were very lucky.

Life in Warsaw seemed "normal". Leon and I visited with relatives there who all tried to persuade us not to go on to the Soviet Union. Our next task was to board a train from Warsaw to Szedlce. The fact that neither Leon or I "looked" Jewish helped a lot. We were very lucky again.

We arrived in Szedlce at midnight. It was already December, cold, and we decided to stay at the railway station, where it was warm for the night. Inside the railway station it was very crowded. There were hundreds of people, mostly Jews, on their



way to the Soviet Union. Suddenly a horde of Nazis, yelling and screaming, ran in and attacked the people, kicking and hitting them with sticks and rifle butts. It was hell; Nazis cursing, women and children crying.

My brother and I somehow escaped being hit. Then, suddenly, a German officer came running toward us, ready to hit us with the butt of his rifle. Noticing my violin case, he stopped and asked what was in the case. When I told him it was my violin, he ordered me to play for him. I played a Mozart concerto. While playing, I observed his face change, becoming more human. Tears appeared in his eyes, and ran down his cheeks. When I finished playing he stood silently for a few seconds and suddenly started to search in his pockets. He found a cigar, and handed it to me, then, a piece of chocolate, and a German mark. He handed it all over to me. He began to speak in a soft, human voice. He wanted me to stay here and wait for him; he was going to bring me food and money. Dawn was breaking. After the German officer left the station, my brother and I left too.

Our next step was to find somebody in Szedlce to take us to the river Bug, the border between the Soviet Union and Germany. We walked the streets of Szedlce, hoping to find some local men to take us to the border and, maybe, to the other side of the

river. It was a cold, rainy day and we had not eaten for a long time. We were very hungry and decided to look for a place to eat. There were many restaurants with signs on the entrance, "Juden a Hunde Verboten", Jews and dogs forbidden. To enter such a restaurant meant ignoring a Nazi order and accepting the risk of being shot. We made the decision to take the risk. As we entered a little restaurant, we saw that it was packed with German officers who were eating, drinking, and speaking loudly.

There was a little table close to the entrance. Leon and I sat down. The Nazis seemed not to notice us. Soon a Polish-speaking waiter brought us rolls, sausage, and coffee. We ate with great pleasure. After about five minutes, the entrance door opened and a young Polish man came in. He looked around, and when he noticed me, walked right up to me and started to curse, using foul, offensive language. "Why does a dirty Jew dare to enter a Polish restaurant and eat?" I looked him straight in his eyes and talked back to him using the same foul, offensive language he had used to me. The man was very angry. He looked at me, said nothing, and left. Just as amazing, was the fact that he said nothing to my brother. All this animosity and hostility was let out at me. We continued eating our meal in peace. Peace, however, did not last long. The Polish man came back with a Nazi SS officer. The Nazi walked up to me and

ordered me to follow him. Amazingly, again, nothing happened to my brother, Leon. I said goodbye to him. I was sure this was the end of me. I had previous encounters with Nazis, but never felt that anything would happen to me. This time I was confident that, in a few minutes, I would be dead. I knew a number of similar cases, in Poitrkov, where my friends were shot. A Jew must not eat!

While I walked after the Nazi, my entire life passed before my eyes. I saw myself as a little boy, saw my parents, brothers and sisters, teachers, and all my friends. Everyone flooded in to say goodbye to me. Meanwhile the Nazi kept walking faster and faster. He was a tall man and I could not follow his steps. Where was he taking me? Why doesn't he shoot me? I knew their devilish tricks. They would walk, and suddenly grab their gun, turn, and shoot you. Several minutes had already passed, and I was still alive.

We were coming to the corner of the street and I knew that this was where he would turn and shoot me. I saw myself dead several times, but it did not happen. The Nazi kept walking, saying nothing. I started to slow down, staying further behind him, while he was paying no attention to me. He walked to the corner of the street and turned. I stopped for awhile, and then



started to run as fast as I could, back to the restaurant. Leon was still there. He jumped up and, in disbelief, mumbled, "Are you alive or were you resurrected?" I told him the story of my escape. He said, "A miracle has happened." And, a miracle, indeed, did happen.

We walked in the direction of the river Bug and noticed a man driving a loaded wagon. We stopped him and asked if he would take us to the river; he agreed. The sun had set by the time we arrived at the river bank. Many people were there, waiting for the right moment to cross over to the other side, to the part of Poland occupied by the Soviet Union. Polish peasants who lived on the German-occupied side made a living by helping refugees cross.

My brother and I walked around to see what was going on. We met a young Polish man and asked if he could take us to the other side. He told us that there were many people waiting to be taken across, and that we will have to wait a few days. Meanwhile, he offered us the shelter of his barn. We did not argue. We had no choice.

The next day, Janek, the young Polish man, noticed that I had a violin, and asked if I would play it with him while he played his guitar. Janek and I enjoyed playing music together, and

became friends. He offered me a bed in the kitchen of his house, and tried to convince me to stay with him, instead of going to the Soviet Union. He explained that he owned a large farm with livestock that his mother had left him recently when she died. He was a wealthy man now. I could stay as long as I wished. He treated me like a king, offering me delicious food and his comfortable home. Meanwhile, my poor brother Leon was miserable living in the barn. When I mentioned this to Janek, he didn't want to listen. "You are my friend, I want you," he said.

A week passed, and each day I saw Janek taking people on his little boat to the other side. I asked him when he was going to take us across the river. He said he would take us across when there were no guards on either bank. "Those Jews pay me good money to take them," he said, "and I don't care if they get caught by the Germans or the Russians." Janek told me to memorize the topography on the other side, and how I should behave if we met any Russian soldiers.

Early one morning Janek woke me up and said, "Get ready, we are going." We went out in a hurry, and I told Janek that I had to wake my brother, Leon, who was sleeping in the barn. "What brother, that old Jew?" he yelled. "I will take him another

time; hurry up!" "He is my brother, Janek, I will not go without him," I said. Janek was furious, cursing and yelling at me. Finally, he said, "I will take you first, and then I will take him." I didn't trust him, and told him he would have to take Leon first, and then me. He exploded, cursing, but finally agreed. Soon both Leon and I were in Soviet territory. We had escaped from Nazi hell and arrived in the Soviet Union alive and well; Mission Impossible accomplished. Now began an interesting, exciting, and dangerous adventure: my new life.

Brest-Litovsk was a big, crowded city, it's streets filled with Soviet soldiers and militia. Most of the people were refugees who spoke Polish, Yiddish and Russian. It was difficult to find a place to live. We came across some old friends from Poland, the three Muszko brothers. They had been here for a while, and had rented a one-room apartment. Again we were lucky, for they offered to share their home with us. The Muszko's were already making a living from a small business they had organized. Leon and I had a little money brought from home, which was enough, for a while, for us to buy food.

We were five men living in a one-room apartment, and we had a great time. The three brothers were talented, amateur musicians. They had brought their mandolins and guitars and



even their drums. We entertained ourselves every night by playing and singing. Soon the Russian soldiers started to join us with their bayan and harmoszkas, and eventually we had a full band.

My brother Leon had a plan to go back to German-occupied Poland to bring the rest of the family back with him to the Soviet Union. I thought it was a good idea, and I was ready to go along. In the end we decided that Leon would go by himself, and I would stay in Brest-Litovsk to prepare for the family. It was February, 1940 when Leon left and I soon got a message that he had arrived safely in Piotrkow.

In the meantime, in Brest-Litovsk, it was a very cold winter, and it was very difficult sleeping on a cold floor. While there was a small brick stove in the room, it was, unfortunately, useless, due to the fact we couldn't get any wood or coal to burn. By this time we had made many Russian friends, mostly soldiers and officers, who visited us every night to listen to us play. Girls started to come by to listen to our band, and we were having a great time making music, singing, and dancing.

One of our Russian friends, Kolia, a huskily-built officer, had offered to buy us a truckload of wood or firing coal. We

gave him a large sum of money, and he went on his way. We waited for a long time, but Kolia never came back. He turned out to be nothing but a scoundrel. He disappeared with our money and I never saw him again. I couldn't believe that a Soviet officer would do such a thing, especially considering the times, and the fact that he knew we had nothing.

A symphony was being organized in Brest-Litovsk. Although I never before played with a symphony orchestra, I took a chance and went to speak with the concertmaster. He auditioned me, and to my big surprise, told me that he liked my playing and wanted me to sit in as first chair and his assistant. I had finally found a good job with a decent salary. I had also become acquainted with a young woman named Clara, whose parents owned a large apartment house. They offered me a furnished room, free. I accepted. My situation had finally improved and I impatiently waited for Leon to return with our family. But, unfortunately, that didn't happen.

A man arrived from Piotrkow and came to inform me that Leon and my family would not be coming. He said that the situation in German-occupied Poland had improved. The Germans had begun treating the population, including the Jews, with more kindness. The man told me that Leon thought it would be possible to stay

there in peace, and that my family wanted me to come home. I was determined not to go back. I met many more people from my hometown who decided to return to their homes. One of my old girlfriends from Pietrkow, whose father owned a wagon and two horses, even offered me a place in their wagon if I wished to return. I stood strong in my decision to stay in the Soviet Union.

During this time, Stalin ordered all refugees from Poland to register with the Soviet authorities so they could be moved deep into Russia, away from the border towns. Some people refused to register, and they organized sit-ins and strikes. They wanted to be taken back to Poland when it was safe, and Stalin had promised to do this. Because of their actions, though, they were considered "convicts". These refugees were loaded into cattle cars supposedly to be taken directly to Poland. But Stalin fooled them. Instead of taking them to Poland, they were delivered to Siberia. They were taken to a taiga, (a thick forest) where the temperature was 60 degrees below zero. There were no houses, shelters, or barns; just woods. They were told: "Here you will live, we will bring you food. A pound of bread and a meager soup will be the daily ration. We will bring you tools to build shelters with. If anyone wants to run away from here you may do so. Remember that you will have to walk a thousand miles through



forest and knee-deep snow, and the wolves and bears are hungry." Most of the "convicts" died of starvation and disease.

My friends the Muszko brothers and I were happy about going deep into Russia and living there. We believed it really was unsafe living in a border town so close to Nazi Germany, so we voluntarily signed up for the trip. Our group was transported, via trains, to Gus-Khrustalnyi, 300 miles north of Moscow. This small, out-of-the way town had a few glass factories and was filled with drunks, many of whom were lying in the streets.

This was not a place for a classical violinist, but I had no choice. The town authorities gave us a warm welcome. We were given clean, spacious dormitories, new work shirts, linens, and shoes. We got a two-week vacation and three meals a day for free. After our rest we were to go to work in one of the glass factories. The job was very hard and exhausting, but the native Russians did the same work.

The factory's cultural club organized a dance every Sunday. We went to relax. Sometimes I would bring my violin, and play with the band. One Sunday, while helping out the band, a party official, Comarde Nikitin, came up to me and proposed that I become the director of the Culture Club and its band leader. I



was a young man of 24 and had no experience in this kind of profession, but I accepted his offer. I thought this would be better than working in the glass factory.

Comrade Nikitin was a kind and intelligent man, and was the head of the factory workers' union. He was also a very important personality in the Soviet political system. He told me I would not have to work at the glass factory anymore, and that my job now was to raise the cultural level of the factory workers. I received a better salary and my life once again improved. It was nice not having to work so hard. I also had more time now to practice the violin. Because of my new position I also became acquainted with the town's intelligentsia.

Most of the local people were former political prisoners or criminals. They were not allowed to live in large or important cities. The Muszko brothers and I were obliged to register with the local NKVD, or secret police, and report once a week. We too were considered exiles or convicts. The Soviet system never trusted people who had previously lived in a capitalist country.

After about a year in Gus-Khrustalnyi, we had become well-established in the community, but we never stopped dreaming of moving to a bigger and better city that had more to offer. One day, Shlomo, the eldest of the Muszko brothers, told us that he

had decided to go and look for a better place to live. He had decided to go to Gomel, a beautiful city in White Russia and we were all supposed to follow him later. No sooner said than done; Shlomo left. We heard nothing for two months. Then came good news. Shlomo wrote that Gomel was a great place for us to live. He had already found a good job; we should come immediately. In two days we were on our way.

Gomel was, indeed, a large city with beautiful parks, gardens, movie theaters, restaurants and music schools. It also was filled with beautiful young women. The first day I arrived I noticed a beautiful young woman with a violin. I approached her, and asked if she played. Her name was Riva, and from her I found out everything about the musical life in Gomel. Riva was a student at a very good music school, with fine teachers, especially violin teachers. She told me about her own violin teacher, Michail Arturovich Shenderov. He was one of the greatest violin teachers in the country, and if I planned to attend this music school, she said I should try to get him for my teacher.

I soon succeeded in becoming a student at this particular school and was lucky enough to get Shenderov as my teacher. There were two students from Poland who were accepted into his class: Gordon, a former student of the conservatory of Warsaw, and myself.

Shenderov was a very demanding teacher who did not like many things about the way I played. He did, however, like Gordon's playing very much. Gordon soon became his most favored student. I was hurt and disappointed. Shenderov wasn't happy to teach me; he even told me to find another teacher because he didn't have time for me. He often became upset and yelled at me because I didn't play the way he wanted. I tried very hard to play his way, but it was never enough. He did not believe I could improve.

I worked very hard trying to please him. I had decided to stick with him, no matter what. As long as he didn't chase me out of his class, I would take his yelling and abuses. Slowly my relationship with him improved. He gave me the Concerto Viotti #22 to play for the first semester. He gave Gordon a much more serious piece to play: Chacona, by Vitali.

On the first semester exam, Gordon did very poorly. The concert hall was packed with students and teachers. Gordon came out, played five bars, and stopped. Several times he started over, but he could never go beyond the first five bars of the song. He left the stage. I was the next student to play. As I came on the stage, I looked around and noticed Mr. Shenderov sitting in the first row, his head down, his face very sad. I started to play. I felt sure of myself.



While I was playing I noticed Shenderov had raised his head, looked at me, listened, and smiled. I received much encouragement from that and began to play even better, trying to bow the way he wanted me to. When I finished playing, I got a good reception from the audience. My relationship with my teacher continued to improve. He now chose a much more difficult piece for me by Vitan.

My teacher explained that he was going out of town, and that I should work on this piece for the month that he would be gone. At the end of the month he returned and listened to me play. He stopped me in one place and asked me to play it over and over again. I asked if I was playing it wrong and he said, smiling, "No, it is excellent!" "You have a natural staccato." Our relationship became more cordial and friendly. Soon something wonderful occurred which I will never forget.

When Michail Shendorov was teaching, all the students who were free from other duties, came to listen and observe. During one of my lessons, while the room was packed with students, Shenderov turned to Gordon and said, "Gordon, you are a good violinist, but you will only be able to play in an orchestra." He continued, "However, Braitberg is a virtuoso, and I believe he will be a soloist." I stood there in shock, unable to believe what I had just heard. "I truly am a very lucky man," I thought



to myself. From that time forward I was treated like a celebrity by all the other students. Shenderov was an authority on talent, and when he spoke, everyone listened.

The Muszko brothers had found good jobs, and were making decent livings. Once I went out to dinner in an elegant restaurant with one of them. The food was delicious, and there was live music with about ten musicians playing operetta and dance tunes. My friend urged me to go up and play with the musicians. I strolled up to the leader and asked if I might join the ensemble. He agreed, and I played. After I finished, the leader told me he was looking for a violinist, and asked if I might like to work for him. His orchestra was playing in a movie theater and in this restaurant, every night. I was very happy to accept the offer.

The Soviet secret police worked 24 hours a day spying on the local population, especially newcomers. Because I was considered a criminal of sorts, they were determined not to let me enjoy my happiness. You see, the NKVD would interrogate everyone, and make you tell things about people you knew, pitting one against the other.

A short time after accepting the orchestra job, the secret police called me into their headquarters for questioning. After

a two-hour interrogation with a gun to my head, the NKVD threatened to expose me as a spy because I would not cooperate with them. They told me I could no longer live in Gomel and would have to return to Gus-Khrustalnyi. I was devastated.

I left the interrogation and went to speak to the director of the movie theater, an old communist party member, and he promised to help me. I don't know what happened. I just kept working and going to school, and I did not hear further from the NKVD.

During this time the Muszko brothers and I also put together a small ensemble and got jobs to play at different occasions. In December, 1940, we had a job to entertain a group of medical doctors. They were having a party and we were supposed to play all night, with a break for supper. At around midnight, we were offered a delicious supper and lots of vodka. I did not know that one of the Muszko brothers was an alcoholic. That night, he drank a lot, and when we returned to the stage he passed out. I took him home, returned to finish playing, and went home to get some sleep in the morning.

I woke to sudden banging on my door. The militia forced themselves into my apartment, and started to search my room. They searched my bed, my suitcase, and my violin case. When I

asked them what they were looking for, they yelled, "You are a thief! You stole an expensive fur hat from the party last night. If you do not give it back you will go to jail." I was in shock. I had no idea what they were talking about. When they finished searching and found nothing, they took away my passport and said I was under house arrest. Without a passport in the Soviet Union, you are an outlaw. "If you do not return the hat, we will come back and arrest you," they shouted.

I was so miserable, I could not fall back to sleep, even after my long night. I was very depressed. In the evening, my piano teacher, Nadiezhda, who also played in our ensemble, came to my house to tell me the happy news that I was free. <sup>she</sup> He also brought me my passport. One of the doctors attending the party had mistakenly put his hat down the sleeve of his coat, and forgot it was there. In the morning when he could not find his hat he naturally called the police. He told them he thought that when I took my drunken friend home, I must have also stolen the hat. When he realized his mistake, he called the police back. The whole thing was over. My happiness was restored. My good luck prevailed.

In the music school, I had a lot of good friends, both young men and young women; we were having such a good time together. The leader of the ensemble in which I played at the movie theater and restaurant, whose name was Naum, also was an alcoholic. Once,



he came to work completely drunk, mumbling, unable to hold his violin. When the audience noticed, they started to whisper and laugh. Naum was fired and the ensemble ceased to exist. Once again I had no job.

And, much to my dismay, the NKVD had not forgotten about me. They called me in again for questioning. This time they tried to write a report that my father was a capitalist exploiter who owned a garment factory. Knowing this to be false, I objected, saying that he was a tailor who worked for a company. They did not believe me, and wanted me to sign the report they had written. I refused. Had I signed their report, I would have been sent to a gulag (prison) as the son of a capitalist. I knew not to sign because this had happened before to a friend of mine. They let me go, again. My luck was holding firm. I was happy, working very hard on my studies. My beloved music teacher chose a very serious music program for my second semester: Tchaikovsky, Sarasate, Mozart, and Wieniawski. It was the end of May, 1941. Michail Auturovich Shenderov made a violinist out of me. Everything I know I learned from him. But I never saw him again after the war moved into the Soviet Union.

June 15, 1941 was a warm and beautiful day. I was walking in the park with a group of friends when suddenly the city radio,



on loudspeakers, informed us to standby for an important official government announcement. A few minutes later the speaker came on, and said that false rumors are being spread about the worsening relationship between Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union, and that none of this is true. Then, a few days later, on June 22, Nazi Germany, without declaring war, attacked and bombed the Soviet Union.

The German Army advanced quickly into Soviet territory. My friends and I volunteered to fight the Nazis, but the authorities refused to enlist us because we were born in Poland. They gave us rifles and guns, and said that we should become partisans. I didn't like the idea, and decided to get as far away as possible to Siberia or Khazakhstan.

It was difficult to get out of Gomen<sup>L</sup>. The whole city was being evacuated East, and the Nazi bombings were constant. I was finally able to escape, and in the middle of July, 1941, I arrived in the capital of Khazakhstan, Alma-Ata. The name means father of apples, and it is a very beautiful city surrounded by tall snow-covered mountains. Alma-Ata is about 100 miles from the Chinese border. The climate is warm all year round, about 72 degrees, and there are lots of fruit trees, especially apple trees. And it was filled with beautiful girls.

The Khazakh people are very kind and hospitable. There were no signs of war here in Alma-Ata and as I walked the streets of the city with my violin, a man stopped me and asked if I played. Fortunately for me, he was the band leader for a dance ensemble, and he needed a violinist. I happily told him I needed a job.

"Why do you speak to me in Russian, can't you speak to me in Yiddish?" I asked him. "Ah, you think that I am Jewish, but I am not. I am Armenian and my name is Aram." He took me to his home, gave me a good lunch and a glass of vodka. "I would like to hear you play," he said. He brought out a piece of music which was a song about Stalin, by Khacahaturian. When I finished playing, Aram said, "I like your playing. You have the job!" He offered me a good salary and free room and board. Once again, my luck prevailed.

Soon, about twenty musicians arrived at Aram's house for rehearsal. They were all Khazakh, Uzbek, Kirgiz and Armenian. They played beautifully together, and I enjoyed listening to them very much. I asked Aram to give me the music so I could play along. "Music?" he said, "We don't have any music." I wondered, how in the world I would play with them. Aram read my mind, "You will have to learn the songs by ear," he said. However, we were supposed to have a concert tour in one week. Our solution was

that for the next two days, Aram played his Kimancha while I wrote down the music. Three days later we left for our concert tour, and I was the only musician who played from the music.

Eventually I learned the repertoire by heart. We performed every day in a different town or for a collective farm. Khazakhs are nationalists. They like their primitive way of life, their traditions, and their music. I learned to play a popular Khazukh song called "Khamazai" which they liked very much. We had a lot of fun and I enjoyed their simple food of lamb, horse, or camel with homemade noodles. This kind of food is called "biesh-bar-mok". It is eaten with the fingers; no spoons were tolerated.

After a year I had enough money saved to enroll at the Alma-Ata Conservatory of Music. I had learned that the best way to make a decent living in times of war in the USSR, was to enroll in a college or university to study. The Soviet system was very supportive of people who studied. I was paid a monthly stipend, enough for a modest life. I lived in the conservatory dorms, and ate at the conservatory restaurant. My life was comfortable again; as comfortable as one could expect in these times.

One day I had an encounter while visiting the Farmer's Market. The market was a favorite gathering place for all kinds of war



refugees and other newcomers to Alma-Ata. It was a place where hungry people could fill up their bellies with tasty foods. The local Khazakh farmers brought all kinds of foods to the market--apples and other fruits, homemade breads, cooked meats, potatoes, vegetables, and even hot soups.

Because they were such hospitable people, they cordially invited shoppers to taste their foods. Thus, the refugees could satisfy their hunger. Once, while I was walking around, a strange man came running towards me, hugged me, and cried, "Thank God I met you, Chaim." He addressed me by my name from home, in Pietrkov. "Thank God, Thank God," he kept saying. I did not know who this stranger was. I did not recognize this dirty, raggedy man in a torn soldier's coat. "Who are you?" I asked, surprised. "You don't recognize me? I am Shlomo Muszko." I couldn't believe it; he looked like an old beggar.

Shlomo told me that he had been at the Crimean battle, and that he was wounded and sick. He had been sent to a hospital in Alma-Ata to recover. Now it was time for him to go back to his army unit in the Crimea, but he was not going to go. He would rather go to jail than to the front line. Shlomo begged me to let him sleep one night in my room. He had nowhere else to go. I explained that outsiders were not allowed, and that I could not



refugees and other newcomers to Alma-Ata. It was a place where hungry people could fill up their bellies with tasty foods. The local Khazakh farmers brought all kinds of foods to the market--apples and other fruits, homemade breads, cooked meats, potatoes, vegetables, and even hot soups.

Because they were such hospitable people, they cordially invited shoppers to taste their foods. Thus, the refugees could satisfy their hunger. Once, while I was walking around, a strange man came running towards me, hugged me, and cried, "Thank God I met you, Chaim." He addressed me by my name from home, in Pietrkov. "Thank God, Thank God," he kept saying. I did not know who this stranger was. I did not recognize this dirty, raggedy man in a torn soldier's coat. "Who are you?" I asked, surprised. "You don't recognize me? I am Shlomo Muszko." I couldn't believe it; he looked like an old beggar.

Shlomo told me that he had been at the Crimean battle, and that he was wounded and sick. He had been sent to a hospital in Alma-Ata to recover. Now it was time for him to go back to his army unit in the Crimea, but he was not going to go. He would rather go to jail than to the front line. Shlomo begged me to let him sleep one night in my room. He had nowhere else to go. I explained that outsiders were not allowed, and that I could not

take him to the dormitory. But he kept crying and begging until, finally, I agreed.

There was a guard at the entrance to the dormitory who was supposed to keep out everyone but the students. I bribed him with a package of cigarettes, so Shlomo slept with me that night in my bed. When I awoke in the morning, he was already gone.

I lived with about twenty students, all boys, in one large room. As a joke, when someone would leave the dorm to go to the bathroom in the middle of the night, we would lock the entrance door so the student would have to stand there and knock for a long time before we would let him in. It was always done in good fun. That morning, after Shlomo had left, I heard a commotion in the hallway. The librarian of the conservatory was talking to the police. When she came to work, she had found the library door open. The police had started to investigate. As I had errands to run, I went back to my room to get ready to leave. The director's secretary came in and told me the director wanted to see me. The director was a Khazakh with a reputation for being mean.

As soon as I entered his office, he started to yell. "How dare you break the rules! You brought a stranger, a thief here, who broke into the library to steal." His face was red and his

eyes shooting fire. He kept yelling. I was in shock. "Give me your passport!" he ordered. "You better bring me the thief, or we will keep your passport and lock you up!" I was scared, angry, and confused. I had tried to do the right thing.

I went to the market to see if I could find Muszko. Finding him there, I told him what had happened. Weeping in desperation, he blamed me for all his misfortune. Shlomo angrily refused my pleas to come back and talk to the director. He decided to run and disappear. I would probably never see him again. I had no choice but to return to the director's office and beg for my passport. I was refused. I went back to my room, sat on my bed, and felt miserable. This was like a horrible dream.

I noticed that my good friend, Kolia, a blind pianist, had come into the room with his wife and child. Kolia was a talented student from Siberia. His bed was next to mine. The little family sat on his bed, and opened a package of bread, some sausage, and cheese. Kolia invited me to eat with them. Although I had no appetite, I agreed to eat something. I asked Kolia if he knew what had happened; he knew nothing. When I told him the story he started to laugh and said, "That's me, I did it." He said he had gone out to the men's room and trying to get back to the room, had gone to the wrong door and knocked until he knocked it open, only to realize that he had gone into the library.



I was ecstatic, and asked him to come with me to the director's office to explain what happened. This, he did. The director, still angry, gave me back my passport. He said, "You broke the rules of the conservatory letting in a stranger. You disobeyed the regulations, therefore, you cannot study here any longer. You are expelled from the conservatory." I left his office a broken man.

I walked the streets of Alma-Ata with pain in my heart. Without realizing where I was, I found myself at the market. I felt dizzy, and sat down. When I raised my head, I saw a dirty shabby man standing in front of me; it was Shlomo Muszko. "You again?" I yelled at him. Suddenly I felt sorry for him, for he looked so miserable. We both sat silently. "Why am I suffering so much lately? What am I being punished for? What have I done wrong?" I asked myself. Shlomo started telling me he had an idea.

We were in the same shoes now: homeless, hungry, with nowhere to go, nowhere to sleep, and penniless. He thought the best thing for us now was to go to a collective farm and work. Shlomo could not do this by himself, since he had no documents or passport. If I were to go with him, and show my passport they might accept both of us as workers. Then, he might be able to get some identification papers of his own. I was so upset that I didn't care about anything, so I agreed to go with him. We walked to the nearest collective farm.



The sun had already set when we arrived. We went into the office and told the secretary we were looking for work. She happily announced that they needed workers badly, and sent us to the bookkeeper to arrange everything.

The bookkeeper turned out to be an evacuee from Kharkov, in the Ukraine. He was very friendly and told us that this was a rich collective farm and he would give us good jobs. Noticing that I had a violin, the bookkeeper told me that his daughter played the violin, and that she, too, was here on the farm. He went to get her. The daughter, Dina, was a beautiful girl with long, dark hair. I liked her, and we started to talk like two friends.

Dina said that if I stayed here, we could make music together, and entertain others. Life looked more promising, and I felt better. Her father invited us for dinner. When we came to their two-bedroom apartment, the lady of the house was already setting the table. I couldn't understand why she only put on four places when there were five of us, including Shlomo, who was still outside. They knew he was with me, and I was sure they had invited him in as well. But, alas, I was wrong. We sat down to the table to eat. I was starving, but I felt so bad for Shlomo that I couldn't eat without him. I suddenly stood up and mentioned that I wasn't hungry. I grabbed my violin and ran out of the room. "Shlomo, let's go; I don't want to stay here." Shlomo was very

surprised, and kept questioning me why we were running away from such a nice collective farm. I didn't say a word to him. I was disappointed and furious with the bookkeeper's behavior. I knew I could not eat knowing that my hungry friend was right outside. I never explained what happened to Shlomo; I didn't think he would understand my feelings.

We walked on in search of another collective farm that we could work and live on. There were white sugar beets in all the fields around us. We sat down and gorged ourselves on them.

We walked in the dark railway station and noticed people loading sugar beets into cattle cars. From the workers we found out that this was a place where local farmers brought the sugar beet crop. The workers loaded the cattle cars and the trains took the beets to a sugar factory. We decided to stay here for a while and work.

This farm turned out to be a miserable place to live and work. Most of the workers barely managed to survive on a daily ration of one pound of bread and millet soup, after 10 to 12 hours a day of hard work. From the passing trains running from Siberia to the front line, the workers would steal anything they could get their hands on, each time a train would stop at the station. They took potatoes, sugar, flour, and leather. I asked them if they would

accept me into their gang, but they refused. "You are a musician," they said, "good for nothing." I had no choice but to live on my meager rations. But this didn't last for long. I organized my own thief company with Shlomo; life improved.

The situation on the war front changed in favor of the Soviet Union. In Stalingrad, Field Marshall Von Paulus and his huge Nazi army had surrendered, and the Soviets recaptured Stalingrad. On Stalin's orders, the whole country was to rebuild Stalingrad. Even political prisoners in the gulags and criminals in the prisons were now needed to rebuild Stalingrad.

In November, 1942, I was recruited into the Soviet Army, to be sent to Stalingrad. This was also my chance to get rid of Shlomo, who had become the source of all my latest troubles, he was too old to be enlisted. I was supposed to appear at army headquarters in Alma-Ata.

Army headquarters was a huge building on the outskirts of Alma-Ata. When I entered the building there were already many people walking around or lying on the straw-covered floor. I got acquainted with the rules: every recruit must have his hair cut. All day we were free, but at night everybody was supposed to register at the headquarters and remain there for the night. A



pound of bread, three candies, and hot boiled water was the daily ration. The man in charge was a senior lieutenant. Every night about a thousand enlisted men filled up the building. Some played cards or dominos, others slept. I used to play Russian songs on my violin. The crowd liked to listen, and sometimes sing along. Every time I played, Nikolai, one of the enlisted men, came over to tell me how much he liked my playing. Sometimes he used to 'cuss' the other people because they were ignorant of my beautiful music. I had the impression that Nikolai was always drunk.

I obeyed all the rules except I didn't cut my hair. I kept my hair clean and I hated to cut it short. One day the Lieutenant noticed my hair wasn't cut. He became furious, and started running toward me yelling and cussing, why did I dare to disobey this order? I tried to tell him that I kept my hair clean, but he wouldn't listen. He ordered several enlisted men to subdue me so that the barber could cut my hair. I was young and strong and I felt like fighting. I wrestled the soldiers to the floor and they could not subdue me. The lieutenant ordered more soldiers to help. Now I was fighting four men and they still couldn't hold me down. After about half an hour of fighting, I had had enough and surrendered. Now, when I recall this episode, I realize how wrong I was at the time. And how lucky.



At last, one morning in December, 1943, we were arranged into cattle cars and started our trip to Stalingrad. Our train moved very slowly, stopping at every station. The local Khazakhs used to bring all kinds of foods to the railway station to sell to the train passengers. Little did they know that these passengers were criminals, including skillful thieves. As soon as the train stopped, these gangs of thieves ran out and started to work, stealing everything the Khazakhs had brought to sell. The poor Khazakhs didn't even notice they were being cleaned out, not only of the food they brought to sell, but of their billfolds, too. I felt sorry for them, but it was interesting to watch master thieves in action.

I kept living on my meager rations, never having the desire to steal from poor people. I had no choice; I was a violinist, not a thief. One day Nikolai, the enlisted man from army headquarters at Alma-Ata came to me with a proposition. He wanted me to stay in his cattle car and play my violin for him. You should understand that the cattle car I was in was so crowded there wasn't even a place to sit on the floor. Nikolai had made arrangements for me to have a bench to sleep on and food to eat. All I had to do was play the violin for him. I was hungry and exhausted and felt I could not refuse such an offer. His cattle car was not crowded and it was clean. Nikolai showed me to the bench where I would sleep and brought me a plate of sausage, cheese, and bread and butter. I was lucky again. Or was I?

In the evening, people filled up Nikolai's cattle car. I recognized some of the thieves I had seen stealing from the Khazakhs. They started to play cards. Nikolai ordered me to play the violin. He was red in the face and I thought he was drunk. I played the violin and I noticed there was a huge amount of money to be won in the game. Suddenly Nikolai yelled, "I play for the whole amount!" He did play, and he won the pot. Before his body guards put the money away in a big bag, Nikolai grabbed a fifty rubble bill and stuffed it into my shirt pocket. This routine went on every night: Nilolai was drunk, and he won a large amount of money, stuffing a fifty or hundred rubble bills in my pocket.

I understood that this was a gambling car for thieves and outlaws, and that Nikolai was the leader. He had four bodyguards, big, strong, and built like bears, ready to crush anyone in defense of their master. Meanwhile, I had a good time playing the violin for Nikolai. I had good food, a place to sleep, and 'made' some money, too.

One afternoon, one of Nikolai's bodyguards, Chortkov, grabbed me by my shoulders, crushing me. In my face, he thundered: "You son of a bitch. You are cheating us out of our money. You go to hell, or I will kill you!" I was shocked and frightened.

This was a desperate situation. I decided I should oblige my friend at least by getting out of there. I grabbed my violin, and ran back to my old crowded, stinky cattle car.

I was very excited, frustrated, and afraid that Chortkov might want to keep his promise. He could easily kill me with one blow of his extraordinarily big, strong fists. He could also push me off the running train. All night, I hallucinated.

With the rise of the sun, the train stopped at a small station. I went out for a breath of fresh air. The local Khazakh's brought out their goods for sale. Now I had money to buy their food, but now I didn't feel like eating. I walked around the station, thinking of my desperate situation.

It wasn't that I was afraid to die. But I had dreams, plans, hopes. I felt that someday I will meet my father, brothers, sisters, and other relatives, even though I knew they must be imprisoned in Nazi concentration camps. I refused to believe that they would all perish. I hoped that someday we would be reunited. And I was still young. I wanted to live. It would be wrong and unfair for me to die from a blow of an underworld figure, or be crunched by the wheels of a running train, after all I had suffered since 1939.



Suddenly, I noticed a man running toward me. Incredibly, it was Nikolai, breathing heavily and yelling, "Why did you do this to me? Didn't I treat you like a king? Come, let's go back." He jumped into my cattle car, grabbed my violin, and ran back to his car. I had no choice but to follow him. I knew I couldn't tell Nikolai that his bodyguard had attacked me. They might have fought, and I might have turned out to be the victim. So I said nothing. Everything became normal again. Nikolai played cards while drunk, winning large amounts of money. I kept playing the violin for him, and he kept pushing big bills into my shirt pocket. Chortkov didn't bother me again.

Nikolai was a mysterious man. I was intrigued by his behavior and began observing him. When drunk, he was in a heightened mood, joking, talking, very friendly. When he was sober, he seemed not to recognize me. He never talked to me while sober.

That opportunity to talk to him occurred unexpectedly. One day, I came to the barber for a haircut. Nikolai was there. "This is it," I thought, "I will try to engage him in a conversation." I said, "Hello, Nikolai. Do you remember me?" With a light smile, Nikolai said, "Sure, you are the violinist." This was great, a real conversation! "Do you like my playing, Nikolai?" I asked. "Oh, yes, very much!" he replied. For a while, I couldn't think



of how to continue our conversation. "Do you have a wife and children?" As soon as I asked this personal question, I felt I had made a mistake and that he would get angry. "No" he answered with a grimace. He got up to leave; I had to follow him. I would get a haircut another day. Outside he said, "I told you I did not have a wife or child. Yes, I did have a wife and a little girl. This is a sad story, but I will tell you anyway." We continued walking.

He proceeded: The year was 1936. My wife, Maria, and I were law students at the University of Swierdlowk. We had a little girl, Tania, and we were happy. One morning two KGB agents came to my house and told me that I am supposed to go with them to their headquarters." He took a deep breath, and continued, "I didn't expect anything bad to happen to me, because I hadn't done anything wrong. At the KGB headquarters, a colonel told me I was suspected of being a 'trotskyite' and was under arrest. My trial didn't last long, and after two days I was on my way to a gulag in Siberia, for eight years. I wasn't allowed to communicate with my wife or little Tania. For six years it was hell. In 1942, I was drafted to rebuild Stalingrad, and here I am. I got permission to go to Swierdlovsk to see my wife and daughter but I couldn't find them there. Finally, I found my wife in a little town not far from Swierdlovsk. She was married to another man. Tania lived

with her grandmother in a different town. I was furious, and decided to kill her, her new husband, and myself. But Maria looked so sickly pale and so miserable that I couldn't do it. I felt sorry for her. And I still love her."

After a while he continued, "The Soviet regime destroyed my life, and I will never, never work for them. I will spend the rest of my life being a parasite. I will steal, play cards, and drink, but I will never do an honest day's work for them." I continued playing the violin every night for Nikolai. He continued to play cards, winning huge amounts of money, and pushing big bills into my shirt pocket. The bodyguard with the boar head and tiger eyes who had threatened to kill me, never approached me again.

In the beginning of March, 1943, we arrived in Stalingrad. Our battalion was divided into groups of 200, and sent to different areas of the city. I never saw Nikolai again. It was good fortune to live in Stalingrad for the next seven years. Stalingrad was a ghost town. There were no streets or sidewalks, only glass, bricks, steel, broken tanks, airplanes, and cadavers. Giant rats ran around everywhere.

My group was assigned to a landing dock on the shore of the Volga River. This dock was part of a giant chemical war plant, #91. We were supposed to unload barges, and carry heavy loads of

chemicals up the steep Volga shore to the plant. This was very hard work. The daily ration was a pound of bread and a watery millet soup. On such a ration one wouldn't die, but neither could one live.

Two men were in charge of our group: Colonel Kuretztkin, a great man who tried to help us as much as he could, and Lieutenant Volkov, a very angry and mean man. Most of the people in our group soon became sick with malaria. Out of 200 men, we were left with about fifty workers; the rest were in hospitals on sick leave, or had died. The sick got much better food in the hospitals. I, too, came down with malaria, and spent 10 days in the hospital on sick leave. For me it was a vacation; I finally had a chance to relax. Then I returned to my miserable life: hard work and hunger.

Soon, everything changed for the better. Colonel Kuretztkin asked me if I would play some Russian songs on my violin for him, after work. "Sure" I said, "Why not?" I was supposed to play for him outside of his apartment windows while inside, he entertained his girlfriend. The first night, after playing for about half an hour, the colonel came out carrying a pot of millet soup with pork, bread, and a glass of vodka. I couldn't believe it; this food was a life saver. "Eat," he said, "Then play more."



I continued to play nightly for the colonel, and he continued to feed me. But the KGB had not forgotten about me. Every so often they called me in to their headquarters, asking many questions, always writing reports. So far, I had not been sent to a gulog.

One afternoon I brought a heavy load up the steep bank of the Volga and had to sit down to catch my breath. A neatly-dressed man approached me and engaged me in conversation. He asked me many questions: where was I born, what was my education, and did I know English? I told him that before the war I had studied English in Poland. He asked me to come to his office. I suspected that he was a KGB and in the beginning I was uncooperative. Then he told me that he was the director of the chemical plant, and he would like to continue our talk. I gladly consented. I felt that something good awaited me.

The next day I came to his large, elegant office. He got up from behind his desk to greet me, and with a bright smile, invited me to sit down. What he offered next, I could hardly believe! He needed a man with a knowledge of English. The chemical plant was receiving supplies from the USA with blueprints written in English. I was needed to translate the blueprints into Russian, and to teach English to the plant's professional staff. For this I will be paid a decent salary, given a nice apartment in Betetovka, a part of Stalingrad which the Nazis did



not destroy, and allowed free meals in the factory's staff restaurant. I couldn't believe what I heard. I couldn't believe I did not have to work at the dock any longer. The director, Ufland, wrote an order for me to receive a suit, two shirts and a pair of shoes. Could all this be true? Was I really lucky enough again to go from a miserable loading dock porter to a neatly-dressed, well-fed, well-housed, elite Soviet citizen? Was this all a beautiful dream, or reality? I always believed myself to be a lucky man, but such a change?

My life conditions turned 360 degrees. I found myself in a new world, living a new life. The conductor of the newly-founded Stalingrad opera and drama theater, came to ask if I would like to play in his orchestra. I happily agreed, and after auditioning, he offered me the position of Concertmaster. I accepted this offer with great pleasure. Now I had two very important jobs, and I became well-known and influential.

I was 28 years old, strong, and full of energy. I began to believe "good things came in bunches". I had a lot of good friends, both men and beautiful women. But deep in my heart I felt lonely. You must remember I grew up in a family of eight children where I was the youngest. I missed the closeness and warmth of my parents, brothers, and sisters. I lived in a foreign

country with a different language and a different culture. I enjoyed the good life, but lacked having someone close to my heart.

I hadn't forgotten my old friend Colonel Kuretztkin. One day I went down to the loading dock to see him, but he was gone. I went back a second time and found out that he had died in a mysterious way. He had fallen off a running track and 'butchered' his head. This was very sad news for me. To me, he was a great man. I learned that some of his friends gave him a lot of vodka to drink, then put him in the front seat of the truck, started the truck moving, and pushed him out. That was the end of Colonel Kuretztkin. I had lost a good friend.

My two jobs kept me pretty busy. Soon I got an offer for a third. The newly founded Stalingrad School of Medicine needed a Latin teacher. I was probably the only person in Stalingrad qualified to teach Latin, but I was determined not to accept the job, if offered. In the Spring of 1943, the head of the School of Medicine's Foreign Language Department, after offering me the Latin teaching position, invited me to her home for lunch. Knowing that she would try to persuade me to accept the job, I was reluctant to accept the invitation. But I went, setting into motion the realization of my true destiny. We had a pleasant talk over lunch and when I was about to leave, the department head

asked me if I would mind visiting the English professor who lived in the same building. I agreed. As I came inside the professor's apartment, I noticed a young, beautiful girl standing by the door, evidently ready to leave. She and I made eye contact. I sat down, noticing that the girl moved slowly away from the door, and then sat down. We kept eye contact all this time. It seemed to me that I knew this girl from somewhere, before, a long time ago, maybe even before I was born.

Meanwhile, the two lady professors were talking to me, but I was unaware of the topic. I kept looking at the girl who suddenly stood up, came over to me and whispered in my ear, "I'm leaving, are you coming?" She had a beautiful singing voice; she still has. This was the sweetest whisper, the most gorgeous music I ever heard. I smelled beautiful roses in Spring. I jumped up and happily said "Oh, yes, I am coming!" and we left together. Her name was Szyfra.

I felt like I knew Szyfra before, that we were once good friends, separated for a long time. It was like we missed each other, and now we were so happy to see each other again. We kept talking in three languages: Yiddish, Polish, and Russian. Szyfra was smiling all the time, and kept telling me about her father, mother, and sisters. She told me where she had been and



what she did while we were apart. And so did I. We had a lot of catching up to do. We both grew up in Jewish Orthodox homes. We felt so close to each other now. We had both left our closest relatives in Nazi-occupied Poland, and we knew nothing of their fates. Until I met Szyfra, I felt lonely. What I needed was a close and devoted friend. Now with Szyfra I had found the missing link, and I was very happy.

Since that memorable day in the Spring of 1943, Szyfra and I have walked hand in hand. We have come through many places and countries, always together, never parting, and having a wonderful time. The powerful magnet that pulled us together in 1943 has never lost its grip. We still have many life stories to tell each other, even after these many years. Szyfra still possesses her beautiful voice, and I know I will love her forever.

This was a time when the two allies, the USA and the USSR, had a good relationship. It was in style, in the Soviet Union, to study English. Although my two jobs kept me very busy, I also had many English students. High ranking communist party members, managers, teachers, doctors, and even professors of the medical school wanted to study English. In order to teach them well, I had to improve my English, so I enrolled in the English Department at the Moscow Institute of Foreign Language, where I worked very diligently on my English.

One of my most distinguished students was Arkdi Isaakovitch Ufland, the director of the chemical war plant #91 where I worked. It was a great honor for me to have the director as my student. Ufland was a wonderful, good-hearted human being. He was always ready to help people in need. In his high position he could do a lot for other people. He belonged to the elite of Soviet society, with high connections in the Moscow ruling establishment. In spite of his position, Ufland was a very modest and righteous man.

When the war ended in 1945, Ufland was sent to the Soviet-occupied section of Germany to requisition much-needed and expensive equipment for his plant in Stalingrad. Ufland normally had all the equipment shipped to the plant. Unfortunately, he made a small mistake. While on a trip to Germany, he bought some furniture and sent it to his home. A vicious, mean woman at the plant, who happened to be the secretary of the Young Communist League, denounced him. She wrote two slanderous letters: one to the Moscow authorities and the other to the Chief Stalingrad Prosecutor.

Because of these letters an innocent and great human being was destroyed. Ufland was expelled from the Communist Party. He lost his job, and the prosecutor promised to put him in jail for 25 years. Ufland was finished. He had fallen from the highest

pinnacle of the hierarchy, only to become a total outcast. None of his powerful friends in Moscow offered to help. A broken man, Ufland decided to leave Stalingrad, and headed for Moscow, to be with his parents. In a cruel twist of irony, he didn't have the money to buy a ticket. Now it was my turn to help him. I gave Ufland the money for the ticket, and watched him leave. I soon received a sad letter from him saying that he was not allowed to stay in Moscow. He had been sent to Gorky, a place for criminals like himself.<sup>4</sup> I never saw Ufland again, and his situation haunted me.

Syzfra and I lived in the elegant neighborhood of Beketovka, which the Nazis had saved from destruction so that they could settle there after winning the battle of Stalingrad. There were beautiful buildings, important factories, restaurants, movie theaters, an electric power station, and other important institutions. After the Nazis lost Stalingrad, Beketovka was taken over by the Soviet elite. Because of my positions at the chemical plant and the Stalingrad orchestra, Syzfra and I were allowed to live there.

Here we became acquainted with many important Soviet personalities. One of our neighbors was the Chief Stalingrad Prosecutor, Tivierovski, and his wife, also a prosecutor. We



occasionally spent time together, eating, talking, and joking. In spite of being a devoted communist party member and an atheist, the Chief Prosecutor liked to tell Bible stories. He told me that he was a descendant of the famous 18th Century rabbi, Rabbi Israel Bal Shem Tov, the founder of the Chassadic Movement.

One day the Chief Prosecutor, came over to our apartment and said he had something very important to tell me. I was surprised and anxious to hear what he had to say, for he never told me stories about his work. "I am angry at the people who misuse the trust that the Soviet Government has awarded them," he said. "This happened in our town," he continued. "The director of a war plant was entrusted by our government, to go to Soviet-occupied Germany to get important chemicals and equipment for the plant. Instead, he brought back furniture for his own use. He is a criminal and a bastard, and I will put him in jail for 25 years." I was shocked. I couldn't say a word. I knew very well what he was talking about. He was talking about my friend, Ufland, a good man and a loyal, devoted Communist.

I told Syzfra what had occurred. We knew we had to help Ufland, but how? It was even dangerous for us to tell the Chief Prosecutor how wrong and misled he was. We decided to invite them for a gourmet dinner. Good food was very important in the Soviet

Union, even for a Chief Prosecutor. We would use the opportunity to talk in privacy, to convince the Chief Prosecutor that Ufland was decent, honest, and innocent; denounced by a slanderous person. The Tivierovski's agreed to come to our place for dinner. We tried very hard to find the best food available. They arrived for dinner on a Saturday and when they saw the delicious food and the vodka, they both seemed in a good mood. After a few drinks, we were all happy. They gorged themselves on the food. The hardest part was going to be how to approach our delicate subject without upsetting them. To my surprise, I heard Szyfra saying "poor Ufland". I expected the prosecutor to explode, but nothing happened. He mumbled something. Encouraged, Szyfra and I carefully and slowly spoke about Ufland. To our surprise, the prosecutor did not become angered as we expected, nor did he object to our defense of our friend. After our dinner, we didn't see the Tivierovski's for awhile.

When we did meet again, in front of our building, Tivierovski immediately began to talk. "I immersed myself in a deep investigation of Ufland's affair, and I came to the conclusion that he was falsely accused by a treacherous person, and that his crime was largely exaggerated. I believe he was innocent, and I have dropped the charges against him. I thought a miracle had happened, and I wanted to kiss him, but I stopped.

Ufland did not return to our town, and with him gone, a new plant director came onboard. He was a dull, boring person, certainly no match for Ufland. He told me there was no need for English at the plant. He said, "If Americans want to communicate with Russians, let them learn to speak Russian." I did not feel needed at the plant anymore, and I resigned. I had one job now, Concertmaster of the Stalingrad Theater. I had more time to practice and to study English. During this time Szyfra ran into some old friends from Lodz, Regina Jeruzalski and her husband, Laible. This happy event turned out to be the beginning of a long-lasting friendship, one that helped soften the hardships of the time, and improved the quality of war-time life.

In May, 1945 the Allies defeated Nazi Germany. On this occasion there was a great celebration in Stalingrad. All the people were in the streets hugging each other, singing, dancing, eating, and drinking. With the war over, Szyfra and I hoped that some of our closest relatives somehow survived the Nazi Holocaust.

Indeed, I soon received a letter from my native town, Piotrkov, with happy and sad news. One of my older sisters, two older brothers, and my twin brother survived. My father, two sisters, nephews, nieces, and many other relatives, perished. All of Szyfra's family was gone. We planned to go back to Poland.



Soon the war was over, the Soviet Union signed an agreement with Poland that all former Polish citizens living in the Soviet Union would be allowed to return to Poland. Szyfra and I were still students, and the Soviet authorities assured us we could stay to finish with studies and then be allowed to go back to Poland.

When, in 1947, we had completed our studies, we applied for permission to go back. But the KGB categorically refused, saying, "Everything is finished; no more going back to Poland." We were shocked and disappointed. For the next twelve years we fought for our right to be permitted to return to Poland.

We wrote to many Soviet authorities that we knew of in Moscow. We wrote to Molotov, the Secretary of Foreign Affairs; to government rulers like Malenkov, and even to Stalin. They all refused our legal right to return to Poland. Meanwhile, we tried to make the best of living in the Soviet Union.

In 1948 I received another happy surprise: I was to be a father! On November 7, 1948 Szyfra gave birth to a big, healthy, handsome baby boy. This was a great event for us both. But when Misha, our son, was six-months old, he became ill with malaria. The doctors advised us to move to a different climate. After once

again being refused by Stalin and his aides to go to Poland, we decided it was unsafe for us to stay in Stalingrad. And, with Misha's illness, we decided to leave. My friend, Jeruzalski Liabile, with a creative plan for us to leave, laid out our trip from Stalingrad to Zbarazh, in the Ukraine. This move was a great improvement in our lives.

Zbarazh is an historical old town with beautiful parks, lakes, rivers, and ancient castles. It was an attractive place to live, work, and raise a family. Shortly after our arrival, I found two jobs: one teaching music in a music school, and two, teaching English in a Russian middle school. We did not give up our plans to leave the Soviet Union for Poland. Now we had to deal with the Ukranian KGB, always rude and sarcastic.

Meanwhile, we enjoyed living in Zbarazh, where life was good, and there were not yet collective farms. In the Ukraine, most farmers still owned their land, and could afford to bring their crops to the city markets. The farmer's market in Zbarazh was packed with vegetables, fruits, poultry, and other goodies.

Not long after our arrival in Zbarazh, the Soviets organized collective farms. Conditions changed for the worse. During this

same time, another happy event occurred. Szyfra gave birth to another handsome and healthy baby boy. David. I had always dreamed of having a son; but two! How happy could a man be? We parents were both delighted.

Many former Polish citizens lived in Zbarazh. Gradually, they managed to get permission to leave for Poland. Soon there were only two families left who had been refused exit-visas. The KGB had a file on every Soviet citizen, and they knew I had a twin brother living in France. They thought that if they let me out of the country, I might go to France. The Soviet authorities feared that former Soviet citizens arriving in capitalist countries might spread the truth about how miserable life really was under Soviet rule, and the lies about it being a paradise would get out. My twin brother and I did, however, keep in touch. He sent me useful supplies when possible. Szyfra and I did not give up. We hoped that one day we would get lucky and be allowed to leave for Poland.

The second person the KGB refused to let go was a man who had served an eight-year jail sentence for political disloyalty. One day this man decided to go to Moscow to find someone who would help him get permission to leave the country. He indeed managed to do this, and finally got his documents to leave for



Poland. When the Refusnik returned from Moscow and told his family the happy news, his father-in-law became so excited that he collapsed and became very ill. The local doctors said that his blood pressure was very high, and that they needed a French medication unavailable in the Soviet Union. Will wonders never cease?

I asked my friend Refusnik how he managed to get the exit visas, but he wouldn't tell me. He wasn't a bad man, he simply feared that the local KGB might get suspicious and cancel his visas. I, however, was in a good bargaining position, because along with greatly-needed supplies, my brother always sent a few extra, valuable things that were hard to find in the Soviet Union. Among these things, he included certain medicines which might keep us well. When my friend found out that I had the medicine he needed for his father-in-law, he begged me to sell him some.

He would have given me any amount of money for this medicine, but I told him he could have as much as he needed for free. In return, he must tell me who secured his exit papers for him. He said he couldn't do this, so I refused him the medicine. The bargaining went on for days. Finally he and his wife reluctantly agreed to speak up and pass on their information. There was a person in Moscow with high connections who could, for a handsome

sum, help people like Szyfra and me get the proper papers to leave for Poland. I gave him the medicine. The old man's condition improved, and they all left the Soviet Union.

Now that we had the name and the address, Szyfra immediately took a train for Moscow. She found the man, who told her she would need ten thousand rubles, and in two weeks, he would have the necessary papers for us to leave. Ten thousand rubles was a lot of money. I had to sell a violin and several other items to raise the money. But we did it.

Soon the KGB called me to their headquarters, and a colonel with a sarcastic smile on his face told me our documents to leave had arrived. We had one week to get out. What wonderful news! We were ready to leave in three days. We left for my native Poland from which I had escaped 18 years before. I had dreamed of its beautiful countryside and nearby forest where, as a boy, I had picked berries and mushrooms. Memories of my teachers, organizations, and friends who had shaped my life came flooding back. Sweet feelings of successes and disappointments of falling in love, and making mistakes; all of these swelled over me. So much had happened to me here. I hoped once again to see my closest beloved family, praying that they had survived the Nazi hell. Much to my personal sadness, I found no family in Poland.

My eldest brother, Leon, my twin, Yaakov (now Jacques), and my older sister, Fela, were all living in France. My older brother, Joe, after surviving a concentration camp, remained in Germany. I ran across several old friends in Piotrkov who were very surprised to see me alive. I took Szyfra and our two boys to the old Jewish cemetery to visit my mother's grave.

We decided to settle in Lodz, where Szyfra lived before the war. The Polish government gave us a warm welcome with offers of financial help, housing, and job assistance. Life in Poland seemed to be much better than life in the Soviet Union. What we were to find was that Poland had become a devoted Soviet satellite, and the Polish secret police was a copy of the KGB.

We managed to find a convenient and beautiful apartment. I had been offered some interesting jobs, but we did not plan on staying in Poland. We wanted to go to France. My son, Misha, 10 years old, was already an advanced violinist. I had started teaching him to play in the Soviet Union at the age of five. What an exceptional violinist he was, never playing out of tune since he began. By the time he was six, he had already played on the stage, with great success. When still in Zbarazh, a violin professor used to come from the Lvov and Kiev conservatories, offering him free room and board and a free education. They



promised to make him a great violinist, but he would have to live away from home. This was impossible; Szyfra and I would never be away from our Misha.

Both boys attended a Polish school and mastered the Polish language in no time. They now spoke Russian and Polish. Meanwhile, our dream to leave the communist "paradise" didn't fade. While in Lodz, we applied for permission to visit my twin brother, Jacques, in France. Leon and Joe had since moved to the USA. The Polish authorities refused to let those who had been in the Soviet Union go abroad. We continued our fight. For approximately ten months, we were refused exit visas.

Finally, one day in 1958 we received a letter from the Polish Ministry in Warsaw. We had been granted a temporary visa to visit France for two months. This was excellent! We thought that we would have to stay in Lodz for at least two years, so we had furnished an apartment. Now we would have to leave everything behind. Our plan was not to come back to Poland.

We took the train from Warsaw to Berlin to Paris. In Paris, we were met by my brother, Jacques, and his wife, Denise. They were waiting for us with smiles, hugs, and flowers. I had not seen my twin brother for 23 years, since he had left Poland to

study in France. This was a happy and emotional meeting. I found out that during World War II, Jacques fought the Nazis in the French underground, while I fought in the Soviet Union. Jacques hadn't changed much since I last saw him in 1937, except for the baldness on the front of his head.

After a short tour of Paris, Jacques took us to my older sister's apartment. When we arrived, she and her husband were visiting the United States. We stayed at her apartment for about two months so my brother could show us "the miracles of Paris". These were exciting moments in our lives. Our pasts had been very difficult; this lifestyle was such a joy to see. Everyday we visited another place. The day after we arrived, we admired the Eiffel Tower and the Champs de Elysees. We also visited Notre Dame Cathedral and the Tomb of Napoleon. After seeing most of the famous sights, Jacques introduced us to his Paris friends. We ate French cuisine everyday in a different restaurant. We even managed to bump into childhood friends who had settled in Paris many years before.

One day my brother took us to a friend's house. This turned out to be very unpleasant. The friend, Mr. Goldberg, was a good chess player, and he challenged me to a game of chess. While we were playing, he kept asking me questions about the Soviet Union.

I answered him honestly and objectively, to the best of my knowledge. Suddenly, he jumped up, slammed both fists down on the table, sending chessmen flying all over the room, and yelling, "You are an agent of the facist imperialists. How much do they pay you to spread these lies about the socialist fatherland?" He was swinging his arms and trying to hit me. His wife came running, grabbing him from behind and calming him down. Jacques later told me that Mr. Goldberg was a professional Communist employed by the French Communist Party.

Soon it was time to leave Paris and go to Ste. Foy La Grande, where my brother and his family lived. This was an old and quaint little town. Jacques occupied a large mansion. We arranged ourselves in a two-bedroom apartment on the second floor, windows facing the river. Close by, Jacques also had a gorgeous fruit orchard and vineyards. We used to drive to the farm often. After the "socialist paradise" we had come from, we realized what a real paradise a free country was.

I was offered a teaching position in Paris, but my brother, Leon, wanted us to come to the "best country in the world." Leon and Joe were living very happily in the United States, urging us to move there. Our dilemma was where to actually establish a permanent residence, in France or in the USA?



After much thinking and discussion, we decided to go to the United States. Before we left, Misha and Martha took part in a competition for young musicians organized by the French National Radio and Television Corporation. They both played exquisitely, and were awarded first prize. They were a success; what a happy event for us all! I was quite proud of them both, and even a little of myself; Misha was my student.

We applied for visas to the US, which was a difficult and time-consuming process. Finally, our request was granted to our satisfaction, and we prepared to leave. For the last twenty years we had been living like nomads, going from one country to another. This life was interesting for a while, but exhausting. For our sons, this would be their fourth country; a great challenge for young boys. Our Gypsy life did not seem to have deprived them of their childhood. They were happy children and never complained. David, now four, was anxious when he realized we were moving again. "What language do they speak in America, Russian, Polish or French?" he asked. "English," I said. He was just a little nervous.

At the port of Le Havre, we boarded the French vessel, "Liberte", and set sail for New York. After a couple of days of sailing, we were caught by fierce storms. Many passengers became

sea sick, including Szyfra. The boys and I fared much better. There were many forms of entertainment on board, and the French food was delicious. The ship's orchestra performed every night for the passengers. One day, while Misha and I were practicing the violin, the orchestra conductor came to our cabin and asked if we would like to perform with them. We agreed.

Misha and I played the Vivaldi Concerto for two violins and orchestra. What a success. We had given our first performance for an American audience. In return for our performance, the ship's captain awarded us a citation and medals. We were so proud and happy.

It was a sunny quiet morning on the sixth day of our voyage. I got up, dressed, and didn't see the boys in the cabin. I quickly ran to the deck of the ship. The boys had been told not to go to the upper deck without supervision. I was angry when I saw them and was about to scold them when they came running up to me, smiling and yelling "The Statue of Liberty, Pa, The Statue of Liberty!" I looked in the direction ahead of me and, indeed, there she stood. We had arrived at last.

In New York, we were met by two HAIS officials. They assisted us, and informed us that we were to go by train to

St. Louis, Missouri. There, my two older brothers, Leon and Joe, would meet us. When we arrived at Union Station in St. Louis, my two brothers were there, with two cars. It was 1959, and I had not seen my brothers in 20 years. We had all lived through some very hard times. Again, my reunion was very emotional, and happy.

The first week, we lived with Joe and his family. Joe owned a beautiful house, with enough space for all of us. Joe owned a shoe business and made a good living. Leon worked in the biology department at the Washington University Medical School. He was still unmarried, and lived alone in his own house. Both brothers were happy to live and work in the US.

Once again, Szyfra and I faced our old problem: how to make a living? Szyfra was lucky, and soon found a job as a medical researcher for Washington University Medical School, where Leon worked. She was quite happy. I had a problem: I could play in the St. Louis Symphony Orchestra, but at that time the orchestra played only 24 weeks of the year. I needed something full-time to support my family. I had to look elsewhere. I could teach foreign languages. But, I had a Soviet education, and in order to teach in the USA, I needed to take courses in American education.

I met a wonderful man, Dr. Alexandre Calandra, professor of physics and mathematics at Washington University who was very



helpful to me. He offered me a temporary job translating Russian into English for physics and math textbooks. This was an interesting job, and I was able to earn some money. For the first time in our lives, we earned real American dollars, in the USA!

Dr. Calandra suggested I enroll in the Education Department of Washington University. After completing some courses in education, I received a temporary teaching certificate, allowing me to teach in the public schools. I applied for a position in the Parkway School District. After a meeting with the school superintendent and his assistant, I was offered and accepted a job teaching Russian and Music. The Parkway School District staffs gave me much support. I developed good relationships with my students. I loved teaching them and I think they liked me, too. Meanwhile, I was still taking courses at Washington University.

After finishing the 15 units in education at Washington University required for my lifetime teacher's certificate, I continued to study. It was much more pleasant and relaxed to study here than in the Soviet Union. I passed the exam to go on to graduate school. In 1966, I was awarded an MA in Education. What a memorable event in my life! With my new degree, I received a considerable raise in my teaching salary, which came in quite handy.

Our dear old friends, the Jeruzalski's were among one of the first groups of refugees to arrive in the US. They live happily in Brooklyn, New York. Every winter we meet in Florida. Our friendship continues to this day.

We are living in the best country in the world. We are rooted in our community, and very happy with our lives. Both of my sons are happily married. Misha, a violinist and violist, lives in St. Louis with his wife, Ruth, also a musician (Natasha is her stage name), and their three lovely and talented children. All of our grandchildren are excellent students in school. All play musical instruments very well. Our son, David, who plays the violin for the Atlanta Symphony, and his wife, Tzipkala, live in Atlanta. David is an excellent violinist, a master fisherman, and a gourmet cook.

Here in this great country, there is freedom, justice, and the opportunity to become anything you want to be, with some hard work, dedication, and good luck. Here, you have the opportunity for a higher standard of living than any other country in the world.

Szyfra and I are retired now, but have a very active lifestyle teaching, lecturing, and writing. Szyfra has just finished her memoirs. I continue to play the violin two hours a day. From

time to time, I give recitals. I play chess as much as possible. My real love is fishing.

Szyfra and I have been blessed to live a long, exciting, and fulfilling life. Destiny has been kind to us throughout the years, and we have been fortunate to have met wonderful people on our life's journey.





Stalingrad, 1944



Stalingrad, Volga, 1944





Stalingrad, Volga, 1946

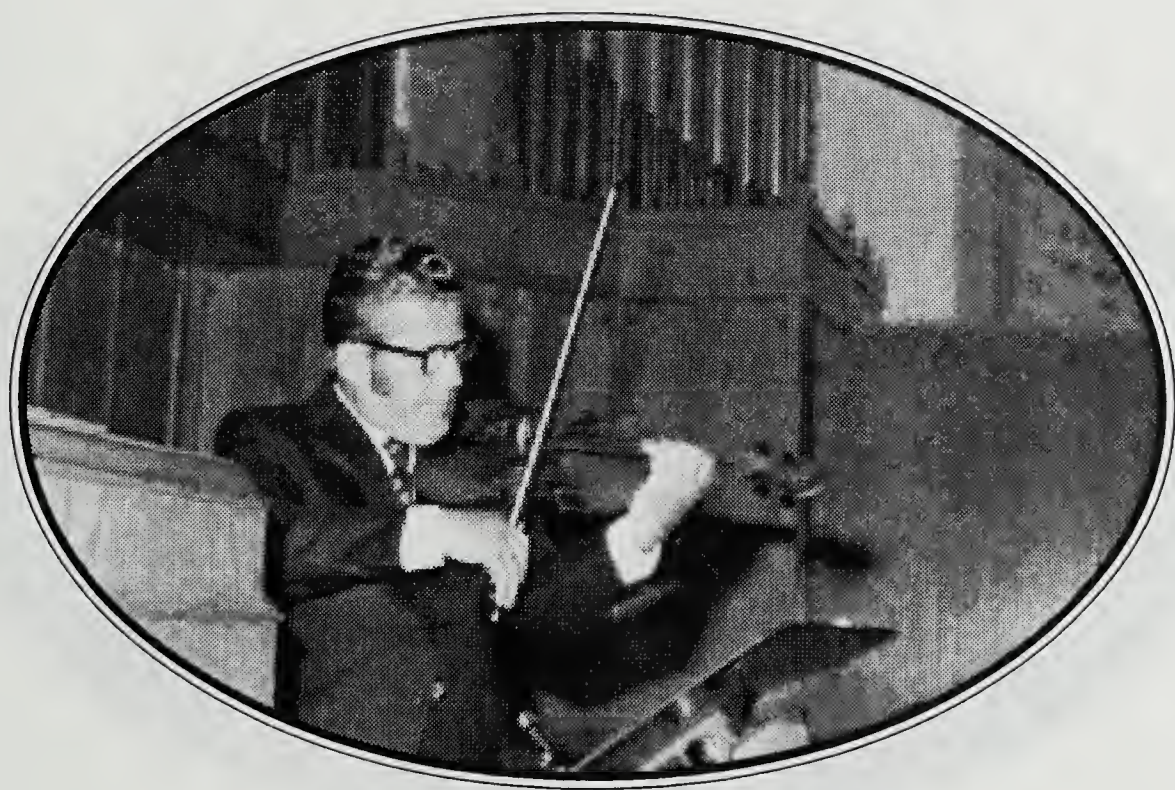


U.S.S.R., 1946





U.S.S.R., 1944



St. Louis, 1973





St. Louis, 1975



Gregor and Laible Teruzabaki, 1983





New York, 1988



Atlanta, 1992





Atlanta, 1993



Elderhostel, YMCA, 1994





St. Louis, 1995



St. Louis, 1996

USHMM LIBRARY



01 0001 0129 1721





